

Practicing the Liberal Arts

Mary Washington College's Preservation Program

Antoinette J. Lee

During the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the historic preservation movement in the United States was gearing up for the "business of preservation." Preservationists were expanding economic justifications for preserving historic buildings and places, an effort that found full realization in the expanded federal investment tax credits of 1981. University-based historic preservation programs, particularly at the graduate level, stressed preservation management and made partnerships with schools of business and law.

In Fredericksburg, VA, the late president of Mary Washington College, Prince B. Woodard, was then envisioning a very different kind of academic program. His was a small liberal arts college that, until the early 1970s, had served as the woman's counterpart of the all-male University of Virginia. In a seemingly isolated, small college-town environment midway between Washington, DC and Richmond, VA, President Woodard sought faculty and administrative approval for an undergraduate program in historic preservation housed in the college's department of history. With approvals in hand, the first introductory course in historic preservation was offered to several dozen students in the academic year 1979-80.

Today, Mary Washington College's historic preservation program is offered through its own independent department. It boasts 160 majors who will earn a B.A. in historic preservation or a B.L.S. (bachelor's of liberal studies) degree. Three full-time faculty are assigned exclusively to the historic preservation program and offer the core courses. An expanding list of adjunct faculty representing professional historic preservation practitioners in preservation law, international preservation, historical archeology, decorative arts, and historical documentation supplements the full-time faculty roster.

Currently, four concentrations are offered: architectural conservation, museum studies, folklore, and historical archeology. While upper-level students specialize in laboratories in one of these concentrations, all are exposed to the full range of the subject matter. The four concentrations are pursued in the classroom, in field work, and, on occasion, in paid-work projects sponsored by the Center for Historic Preservation. Recent course offerings of the Department include international study in Brazil and Great Britain. The Center for Historic Preservation sponsors activities that support the academic program and facilitate faculty and student participation in historic preservation activities in the region. Mary Washington College graduates can be found in the nation's major public agencies and private organizations as well as community-based groups. Large numbers of students participate in community activities, such as the annual "Ghostwalk" at Halloween, through the Historic Preservation Club. Alumni are kept in touch through the newsletter.

President Woodard's early vision still serves as the guiding force for the program. Its location is a decided asset because of the tremendous expansion of the Washington metropolitan area. Today, Fredericksburg is the home of many who commute to Washington or to the employment centers of the region's "edge cities." Mary Washington College is expanding its continuing education offerings to take advantage of the population boom, which provides a ready market of older and part-time students.

In its basic philosophy, the preservation program provides a liberal arts focus because of the belief that heritage touches all areas of the human experience. Where many university and college-based historic preservation programs are offered at the graduate level to further develop interests developed at the undergraduate level, Mary Washington College offers a wide breadth of liberal studies in historic preservation with the expectation that some students will find employment immediately as a historic preservation generalist or may develop

more specific professional interests at the graduate level. Still other students pursue related careers but have gained an essential grounding in historic preservation.

Mary Washington College's historic preservation program is more than a place to pursue preservation's theoretical constructs; it also requires field work. Hands-on experience is an important component in nearly every core course, where historic resources are met face-to-face. For the architectural conservation focus, students prepare



Archeological investigations of the Enchanted Castle site at Governor Alexander Spotswood's Germanna provides Mary Washington College historic preservation students with field experience. Courtesy Center for Historic Preservation, Mary Washington College.

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“Teamwork,” the tired, frequently overused label, was mentioned only once in the course agenda. However, without thinking much about it or calling for it directly, a team approach developed quickly as participants became room mates, then work mates solving exercise problems, then often friends who discussed their park concerns to come up with creative solutions. They recognized their differences but soon found that they could help each other, not only in the exercises, but in planning after-hours activities, preparing for classwork, taking a hike in the canyon, or in addressing existing park issues.

At the course’s conclusion, with equal enthusiasm for each discipline, the group themselves adopted an action plan—a set of objectives and actions—to further their self-defined mission: to strengthen the pride and vision of the NPS by empowering people through creative leadership and an interdisciplinary team approach. The first objective was to attain a pervasive awareness throughout the service of the need for interdisciplinary efforts. This article is one of the actions identified to achieve this objective—to call attention to the course and to the enthusiasm the course participants have for working together to achieve park goals.

Focuses of the course included human resources management—a delegation of responsibility and authority approach was advocated, one of the elements of effective leadership. Diversity in personal and work styles was illustrated through testing participants and illustrating how diverse styles can complement each other in a work environment. Decision making, time and risk management, communications and negotiating, press relations, and managing change were all interesting components of the management curriculum. Sessions on planning linked well with the resource management segments, and Associate Director Jack Davis fittingly linked the course to the Vail Agenda and the leadership required as the NPS enters the 21st century.

Nine each of park interpreters, administrators, maintenance professionals, and protection rangers have committed themselves to professional leadership and management of park resources into the next century after completing this course, what many called their “best course ever.” Their hope is that all park specialists are able to join in this program through future courses to share knowledge and understanding among an even wider group of park professionals.

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measured drawings and photographs and undertake documentary research on a historic building as well as analyze materials deterioration in a laboratory setting. For the museum studies focus, the Center’s James Monroe Museum, also a National Historic Landmark, offers students an opportunity to develop exhibitions. Folklore-focused students may document vernacular buildings in a rural landscape. For those students who select historical archeology as a focus, the Germanna Archaeology Project (Governor Alexander Spotswood’s 18th century plantation manor house) or the Market Square site in downtown Fredericksburg provide literal hands-on experience.

Classroom work frequently involves projects with community value. For example, students are required to prepare nominations to the National Register of Historic Places and to shepherd the nominations through the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. Students also create documents to be used in a wider venue, such as preparing a computerized database for the Mutual Assurance Society insurance policies from the 1790s to the 1860s, making accessible information on Virginia buildings that includes site maps, floor plans, and building materials. Other projects include the creation of a database on advertisements for runaways from the 1740s to the 1780s, made from those published in the *Virginia Gazette*, which will provide valuable information on the ethnography of the indentured white laborers; the preparation of an index to the journal of the *Association for Preservation Technology*; and the re-survey of properties in the Fredericksburg Historic District using the National Park Service’s Integrated Preservation Software to update the district’s documentation (since its listing in the National Register of Historic Places in 1971).

What is the future of the College’s historic preservation program? Clearly, the undergraduate program has reached a threshold in its evolution. Department chairman W. Brown Morton III reflects: “The hard work of basic undergraduate program development is accomplished. We will continue to strive for excellence. We are presently developing a curriculum for a graduate program in cultural resource management.”

On the horizon are expanded architectural conservation and historical archeology laboratories. The program is working toward the use of Computer Assisted Drafting (CAD) to document historic and archeological properties. The folklore and folklife laboratory class will be developed. Finally, the Center for Historic Preservation will expand international academic and field work opportunities for students, faculty, and alumni. Across the nation, the “business of preservation” has subsided with changes to the federal tax code and the recession. However, the late Prince B. Woodard’s vision of historic preservation as liberal arts has found a secure niche in higher education at Mary Washington College.

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